



Is Europe really lost?

Manfred von Hebel, Hans-Georg Wicke

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Is Europe really lost?

by Manfred von Hebel and Hans-Georg Wicke

A youth and education policy analysis of the renewal of Europe

Current developments in Europe are giving rise to some concern about its future. While Europe was and is in a constant state of flux, the UK's decision to exit the European Union is an unprecedented indicator of a growing mistrust vis-à-vis an open and solidary Europe. The main concern these days is to preserve European principles and prevent a return to the nationalist tendencies of old. The European ideal needs to be renewed. We need a new European narrative that responds to the realities of everyday European life. Here, the authors suggest a ten-point plan for an initiative to renew Europe from a youth and education policy perspective.

What would have been needed was a clear signal, a convincing commitment to each other, or even a renewed vision for Europe. Months after the shock of Brexit, after a period of reflection and analysis, we would have expected a pronounced rededication to Europe or at least a more passionate response to the signs of an impending collapse. Instead, the reactions of both the European Commission and of European heads of state and government left a lot to be desired.

In his 2016 State of the Union speech, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker called upon all of the Member States to take responsibility. "We have to stop with the same old story that success is national, and failure European. Or our common project will not survive" (*European Commission 2016*). However, the measures he proposed in the following were more or less a continuation of tried-and-tested approaches.

By contrast, the Bratislava Declaration that Europe's heads of state and government issued a few days later had a more committal ring to it. "Although one country has decided to leave, the EU remains indispensable for the rest of us. In the aftermath of the wars and deep divisions on our continent, the EU secured peace, democracy and enabled our countries to prosper. (...) The EU is not perfect but it is the best instrument we have for addressing the new challenges we are facing. We need the EU not only to guarantee peace and democracy but also the security of our people" (*Council of the European Union 2016*). Unfortunately, it was only a matter of hours before a number of heads of state attempted to relativise and even contradict the message of the Declaration.

It is not easy these days to implement a European programme that seeks to achieve an ever closer European Union, greater closeness between the citizens of Europe and more social cohesion. Rarely have we in our work seen a greater mismatch between ambition and reality.

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Caught between EU enlargement and Brexit

Europe was and is a political project and as such is naturally in constant flux. Against this backdrop, the current state of affairs should be seen merely as part of an ongoing process of Europeanisation, of which the European Union's enlargement over the last three decades is yet another part. The dictatorial regimes in southern and eastern Europe collapsed, as did the Wall. In the aftermath, the idea was to assist the newcomers in implementing the Union's *acquis communautaire* so as to ensure that a shared democracy and market economy could flourish in the heart of Europe. The resulting enormous challenges and speedy changes faced in particular by the new EU members and their populations led to the tangible tensions between western and eastern Member States we observe today. The problematic implications of realising such an extensive enlargement without addressing the necessary changes to the core, the procedures and structures of the EU are now laid bare. A union that is predicated exclusively upon a single market, without sufficient attention given to building a shared identity, cannot but fail. The fundamental question is, what holds the European Union together?

In the midst of this comes the UK's recent decision to exit the EU. After decades of enlargement, this is probably the very first time a Member State has deliberately decided to depart from the European Union.

Now it would be untrue to claim that the UK has so far been a poster-child for European Union membership. On the contrary, for four decades the country has consistently claimed exclusive status, considering itself a step apart from the rest. In this vein, it has repeatedly sought to place the blame for any national political failures squarely with the EU – an attitude that, while not necessarily a solely British phenomenon, the UK has deliberately cultivated. It is no surprise that these years-old structures and mechanisms could not be reversed during the relatively short lifetime of the Remain campaign, especially given that the arguments put on the table by the Remainers were hardly a suitable armour against the populist propaganda peddled by the Brexiteers. The Remain campaign bet most of its money on the general economic advantages offered by the EU as a free single market while largely failing to highlight the benefits of living in the European Union, the advantages it offers its citizens, social cohesion, and peace in Europe, in short: the values – and the value – of Europe. No wonder that the arguments of the Remain campaign, of the proponents of EU membership, seemed insignificant and unconvincing against the backdrop of the UK's reluctant relationship with the EU.

In this charged climate, it would have been necessary to counter the populist propaganda by holding up a positive image of the EU. It would have been necessary to build a narrative that is less about the smooth transfer of capital between the EU and the UK and more about the emotional benefits of EU membership.

A narrative was admittedly there, but it was co-opted and exploited and given a decidedly negative headline by the Brexit campaign. The Brexiteers succeeded in placing the blame for the negative consequences of neoliberalism squarely at the feet of the EU. Inconsiderate populists and gamblers took the obvious social divide that exists in most EU Member States, ethnicised it and used it as a weapon against the EU. The result: an unparalleled hate campaign based on lies, misinformation and fantastical promises. Coupled with targeted propaganda against foreigners, migrants and refugees, this toxic mix has left behind a deeply divided nation.

It is remarkable that the UK population's voting behaviour clearly reflects the fault lines along which British society is structured today: urban versus rural, young versus old, educated versus uneducated, middle class versus working class. While this is hardly news, it is an important indicator of what needs to be done in order to overcome this divide and maintain and strengthen social cohesion and social peace across Europe.

A point of concern is that no one in the UK seems to have suspected before the fact that the Brexit referendum, which originated in party politics and was very much dominated by post-factual populism, could have yielded the result that it did. Post-Brexit, the UK remains divided over European and social issues, a country dominated by the political right, where hate, racism and violence against migrants, foreigners and dissenters run unchecked.

The circumstances leading up to Brexit are by no means an exclusively British phenomenon; in fact they are commonly found elsewhere in Europe, too. The European Union's neoliberal policies, which are largely aimed at structural reform to boost competitiveness, pay no attention to social cohesion – an oversight that has resulted in profound social tensions across Europe and within the Member States. Its institutional decision-making processes lack democratic legitimacy and are dominated by Member State governments. This has yielded fertile ground for a growing fundamental mistrust of the EU's supposed elites. In the absence of trust in the power of joint European action, people turn to their nation states in search of salvation. However, no decision is ever taken in Brussels without the approval of all Member States – so the “Brussels elites” are always a projection screen for the mistrust directed at the elites in one's own country.

Preserving European principles and values

Rampant populism and raw propaganda show how easy it is to channel this mistrust. The developments in the UK have encouraged other extreme forces to think the previously unthinkable. Today, Europe is held up by right-wing populists as an embodiment of danger. Core characteristics of the European Union are being undermined and recharged with negative connotations: mobility and migration (“swarms” of foreigners, Islamisation, loss of identity); plurality (too much diversity, excessive consideration of minority opinions); democracy (lack of room for manoeuvre, insufficient control); and solidarity (social decline, rising poverty), etc.

This game is also about power. What other rationale could there be behind a policy that spreads hateful propaganda, then asks the population to vote on an issue such as Hungary's refugee policy that isn't even an issue at all in the country in question, where the outcome of the vote is legally entirely irrelevant?

As Thomas Schmid (2016) writes, Hungary's indecent, coolly calculated nationalism is stretching the European Union to its limits. The only response to this, he continues, is dialogue, diplomacy and a fidelity to the principles and values of the EU. One crucial advantage of the EU is that it is a permanent platform for negotiation and dialogue, a dialogue that may never end. European unity is a postnational project. It must, and will, remain so. “European Union” means basing the relationship between a collective of states not on power, but on the law. This, writes Schmid, is a project unprecedented in history, and it is a successful one. The EU is bigger than the nation state(s), he concludes.

While there appears to be lack of clarity about the direction in which the European ideal is developing, the current concern is not so much its further development but rather the prevention of its degeneration. The debate triggered by the shock of Brexit has divided people into camps. Some want “more Europe” and still believe that the EU is all about overcoming the principle of the nation-state; others want “less Europe” and prefer a return to the nation-state. The defenders of an open, diverse Europe are having to deal with an increasingly populist and right-wing propaganda issued by an identitarian, homogenous and “white” Europe. One camp is calling for the EU to be reduced to a free trade zone with powers that go no further than economic policy and the preservation of free markets; the other wants a deeper, social Europe that is capable of bridging the divides in Europe's societies. Southern Europe's interest in social justice across the EU

conflicts with the northern and eastern European states' unwillingness to engage in a deeper, more harmonised Europe. The desire on the part of some smaller Member States for European solutions is obliterated by the overbearing force of the economic powerhouses in the EU. The genuinely European interests of the European Parliament and the European Commission are being pushed back by the Member States' individual interests. There has been a clear power shift away from the EU towards nation-state players and their nation-state solutions. What was once unthinkable – the dissolution of the EU and the domination of nationalist philosophies – is suddenly a real possibility. What we used to take as given – the existence of the EU and the principle of European integration – has been thrown into question.

But do we really have that little to lose? It is naive to believe that this debate is primarily about preserving the institutions of the EU, when instead it is really about preserving European principles and values.

Cooperation across Europe was and still is the most effective response to war, violence and intolerance on this continent and beyond. Do people really believe that in today's globalised world, national economic, financial and labour market policies are genuinely more effective and that countries can succeed in the international arena on their own? That sustainable, viable environmental policies are possible without pan-European cooperation? That peace and security policy is more a national than an international task? That socially induced conflicts inside and outside of Europe can be ignored, with individual countries choosing to pull up the drawbridge rather than engage in transnational cooperation?

Either way, the consequences of a weak Europe beset by infighting are already apparent. How strong and effective is Europe's voice today, faced with an increasingly Cold War-style conflict with Russia? What is the EU doing to strengthen the moderate Islamic forces in Turkey so peace can be secured in the Arab world? What hope (of integration) do states like Ukraine, Serbia and Macedonia have today, countries that have undergone major political, social and economic transformation with EU assistance? To what extent do the former transition countries in central and eastern Europe still feel committed to the *acquis communautaire* of a weak EU? Who will compel them to comply with it now and in future? Can Europe still offer the multitude of civil society initiatives in the Member States that are working towards diversity, democracy, solidarity, human rights, freedom, peace and social justice the political and moral support that is so vital especially in critical periods? Can a Europe weakened by infighting truly protect its citizens, especially the younger generation, from destructive nationalism? And can it continue to provide an environment that guarantees its citizens freedom and a good quality of life?

Renewing the European ideal

The consequences of Europe's political failings are becoming apparent and more to the point, are rendering the EU incapable of introducing genuinely effective, necessary reforms. Civil society's lack of interest in the evolution of the EU has potentially disastrous implications and will continue to weaken its very existence and ability to take action. The democrats' indifference is dangerous; it needs to be turned back into political commitment. A return to nationalism must be prevented and openness and democracy in Europe defended. The European ideal needs to be renewed: that of an open and social Europe that affords everyone a life in dignity. A Europe that is peaceful, solidary, democratic, free, pluralistic, tolerant, participatory, inclusive, forward-looking and viable, one that is based on the rule of law. A Europe in which diversity is an asset.

Ulrich Beck defines the corresponding task as follows: “Find a European form of cooperation whose collective power is capable of protecting the rights of every individual in every national society and of ensuring that all individuals who collaborate with members of other linguistic or political communities are stronger and freer than they were before” (2014, p. 12, *translation from the original German*). Beck’s vision is not a utopia, neither is it a sociological illusion. Instead it is a reality for, and taken as a given by, millions of Europeans today, a fact largely ignored in the current isolationist debates. According to Vincenzo Ciccheli (2014), the younger generation experiences European society as a dual form of sovereignty: the sum total of the possibilities afforded to them at the national as well as European level. However, young people do not identify as exclusively European.

Signing up the European project

No one is just a European. Young Europeans self-identify primarily via their nationality, then as Europeans. A Europe without borders and with a single currency offers them unprecedented opportunities to grow up in a social space with a wealth of cultural assets.

We need to (re-)establish Europe and restore our awareness of its values and identity. We need to trigger a new, different process of Europeanisation that delivers a strong sense of identity, that is removed from institutions and meeting rooms and that puts its citizens and their lives in the spotlight. We need an all-encompassing initiative for a renewal of Europe, one that defends Europe against anti-European movements, one that strengthens European identity, awareness and commitment. And we need all this especially for the younger generation for whom Europe is both their current and their future habitat.

So what needs to be done in civic education, youth work, youth welfare and youth policy? How can we help young people to experience Europe as a place to live, develop and grow? How can Europe become a source of identity? How can we engage with it critically and sign up to the European project? What role does civic education play in this? What can youth work and youth welfare providers do to bring about this European renewal? How can we launch an initiative encompassing all of society to strengthen the aforementioned European identity, awareness and commitment?

Below, we propose a joint ten-step initiative for the renewal of Europe.

01 Europe makes a recognisable contribution to young people's lives.

The financial and economic crisis highlighted more harshly than ever the widely varying circumstances under which young Europeans grow up today. It demonstrated how dependent young people's lives are on European and global developments and revealed the inability of nation-states to produce viable solutions on their own. The consequences of the crisis, by which the younger generation was hardest hit, are still apparent today. They are a daily reminder of how vital it is to strengthen a social Europe. And they illustrate how very necessary it is for Europe to take responsibility for providing a favourable environment in which young people can grow up successfully.

In other words, Europe needs to make a recognisable contribution to young people's lives. To date, Europe has no comprehensive policy for young people. We need a civil society that transcends national borders and calls for a socially oriented European policy that puts young people first. Civic education can help to bring this social dimension of Europe into sharper focus.

02 Europe has a strong youth policy.

Youth policy is a sectoral as well as a mainstream policy field. It provides space for participation and for acquiring skills, and it helps young people to lead independent, fulfilled and happy lives. Youth policy promotes personal and social development, especially for young people with fewer opportunities. Young people have a right to a comprehensive and holistic European youth policy. Giving young people all the opportunities they need is a task for all of society.

So far, Europe has no youth policy in the classic sense. The EU Youth Strategy provides a relatively limited framework for youth policy cooperation in Europe, the future of which will be decided upon over the next two years. Engaging in youth policy also means having to engage with Europe. The groundwork has been laid; now, youth policy stakeholders are called upon to help shape an extended youth policy cooperation for the period post-2018 while building a European-themed youth policy for Germany. Civic education can contribute towards developing such a European youth policy and to communicate its relevance.

03 Europe needs more European education.

The European renewal project calls for more European learning, more information and knowledge about Europe, a greater European focus in formal as well as in non-formal education, and a stronger emphasis on European citizenship. This can only happen if we take a critical look at our own values and how they relate to what we know and how we feel about Europe, a process that requires education and reflection. The result of this exercise would be an informed European identity and an enlightened European awareness.

Attempts to respond to this challenge in schools, universities and non-formal educational settings have failed, even though all three share the same aim, namely to enable learning. A stronger Europe needs more European learning, European education, and a shared action plan for more European citizenship. Against this backdrop, civic education is particularly called upon to rise to the daily challenge of teaching Europe.

04 Young people bring Europe to life.

There can be no active European citizenship without a willingness to give back. There is ample evidence that young people's personal experience of Europe, such as participation in a European youth work project, is most likely to lead them to commit to Europe long-term. Experiencing learning through cross-border mobility is a vital aspect of social participation in Europe; as such, it is a right for all young people. Experiences like this help young Europeans to lead independent lives, acquire the skills they need to be Europeans, familiarise themselves with Europe, speak languages, interact with people from other cultural backgrounds, understand Europe, live in it, contribute to it, and learn and work in it.

A European renewal means having to give all young people access to learning opportunities through cross-border mobility – making it the rule rather than the exception. The youth work community plays a major role in this respect, with a strong track record in this area that stretches back six decades. All the reason to embark together on the next leg of the journey with confidence: to agree on action plans and binding benchmarks at the EU level, to develop strong mobility initiatives at national level, and to adopt development plans to promote mobility at the local and regional level.

05 Young people make a commitment in and for Europe.

Europe cannot function without young people's active European citizenship. It requires them to embrace responsibility, participate in society and help shape policy. The European Voluntary Service, which welcomes 10,000 young volunteers every year, is probably the most obvious outward sign of European commitment. In 2012 Ulrich Beck and Daniel Cohn-Bendit called for the setup of a European Year of Volunteering for Everyone as "(...) an act of self-assertion by European civil society: an act that can be used to construct a new proactive constitution from the bottom up in order to reestablish Europe's political creativity and legitimacy." President of the European Commission Juncker recently proposed giving another 100,000 young volunteers an opportunity to join the European Solidarity Corps by 2020 to express their solidarity with Europe.

To date, a commitment in and for Europe has been nowhere near the focus of attention in youth work or civic education. It is time to change that. It is time for a strong and broad initiative to promote active European citizenship among young people. And it is the right time to transform the European Voluntary Service into a broader volunteering scheme for all young people in Europe and for Europe.

06 International youth work embraces a responsibility for Europe.

Besides promoting international understanding, reconciliation, foreign cultural policy, intercultural learning and diversity, the international youth work community has long since engaged strongly and actively in European youth projects along the entire child and youth welfare spectrum. Besides classic youth exchanges, a wide range of formats for European cooperation has emerged. By 2020, Erasmus+ Youth in Action, the EU programme for European youth projects, will have acquired a financial volume that goes far beyond what has been spent to date on international youth work projects under the German Federal Government's Child and Youth Plan.

Given the crisis currently unfolding in Europe, the spotlight must now be directed at Europe itself and at what it means to be European. Traditional international youth work institutions must face up to their responsibility for Europe. They must put Europe first in everything they do and must assist child and youth welfare organisations in engaging in effective European cooperation. Civic education is called upon to develop effective educational programmes to this end.

07 There is a genuine European civil society.

The development of a European polity, a European way of life and the recognition of the realities faced specifically by young Europeans are crucial to the European renewal project. At the same time, what we need is opportunities for participation beyond national borders – in other words, we need to build a European civil society. This civil society must be given a systematic and structured role to play when it comes to shaping European policies.

A Europe that is social and true to life requires that the child and youth welfare community as well as civic education organisations be far more aware of Europe than they have been so far. We need more European projects and activities for young people. We need more Europe in the professional sphere. Institutions and structures need to be more European. And we need more European cooperation at all levels, in the private as well as the public sector. None of this is easy, but it is an urgent necessity.

08 Regional governments and municipalities assume responsibility for Europe.

There is traditionally a wide gulf between the local level and Europe, not just structurally speaking, but also politically and philosophically. Municipalities tend to see themselves as entities that are affected by Europe rather than as active European subjects. Yet they and their regional counterparts have a special responsibility for creating a favourable environment for their young citizens that involves teaching European values and offering them corresponding opportunities. At the same time, cross-border cooperation can be helpful in shaping effective youth policies on the ground.

The European renewal project needs more regional governments and municipalities to take responsibility for Europe. Governance models, such as that used to manage the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy in Germany, need to have a reach right down to the local level. At the same time, to inject more Europe into the community we need local and regional development strategies. Civic education could play a major role in this respect.

09 Europe has effective funding programmes for young people.

Erasmus+ Youth in Action is the programme for promoting European awareness and engagement, active European citizenship for young people, European youth work and youth policy cooperation across Europe. It encourages cooperation between young people, experts, organisations and structures. In all of this, the European values loom large: diversity and pluralism, solidarity, an open Europe, and the fight against racism and xenophobia.

At the heart of the European renewal project is an even stronger Erasmus+ programme, in which Youth in Action takes on a special responsibility for promoting young people's active European citizenship. This will require a bigger budget, for the current demand for financial resources far exceeds the planned increases. And it will mean having to make an active contribution to shaping the future of the programme post-2021.

10 Rewriting Europe's (hi)story: A new narrative emerges.

While they remain valid to this day, the old stories about Europe that gave it its current identity have lost much of their impact. That said, Europe remains a practical reality, with a lifestyle practiced by Europeans that would be hard to conceive of if the EU were dissolved and its internal borders closed. There are millions of European "contacts" every single day: at work, at school, at university, in volunteer projects and in the thousands of European youth projects that take place every year. And there are the uncounted individuals in NGOs, in academia, in public-sector organisations and authorities, the private sector and in politics who practice European cooperation on a daily basis. There are friendships, teams and collaborators that stretch across the entire continent. There are European families for whom cultural and linguistic diversity is a normal part of their daily lives. These are the real stories about Europe. They tell the story of Europe from the bottom up.

However, these stories rarely, if ever, enjoy public awareness. A renewed Europe needs a new public arena. It needs more spaces, more opportunities, for us to talk to each other and conduct a dialogue about Europe. Youth work, youth welfare and civic education have a major role to play when it comes to creating these spaces and opportunities so that a new European narrative can emerge.

We are convinced that a renewed Europe needs a new European narrative, one that responds to the real-life experiences of its citizens, particularly the younger generation. This narrative plays a vital role in transforming Europe into a viable living space for its

citizens. We are also convinced that this new European narrative needs to be written, shaped and brought to life by the younger generation, together with those who work in civil society, in politics, in administration and in business. In Claus Leggewie's words (2016), we need a narrative that holds us in its grip, one that resonates with the realities faced by Europeans today. A narrative that tells us how to create a sustainable Europe over the next two decades, but also one that is socially more equitable, that creates and preserves public spaces, that highlights the benefits of European urbanism, and that teaches us what a pluralistic culture needs to look like. Much of this already exists today. But we need to describe in greater detail what we love about Europe. We need to paint a picture that is so absorbing that future generations, too, will sign up to it. This is above all a task for the middle generation, whose members experience Europe at work, in their daily lives, as European citizens every single day, but do not succeed in communicating this clearly enough to the outside world.

It is up to us to rewrite the story. Let's get started.

About the authors

Manfred von Hebel, an educational science graduate, has worked in national and international child and youth welfare for more than two decades. Between 2005 and 2009 he was a National Expert for the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture. In 2009 he joined JUGEND für Europa, Germany's National Agency for the Erasmus+ Youth in Action programme, as Head of Strategy and Projects.

✉ vonhebel@jfemail.de

Hans-Georg Wicke is a social science graduate whose track record in youth work, youth policy, non-formal learning and civic education at the national, European and international level spans three decades. In 1995 he was appointed the director of JUGEND für Europa, Germany's National Agency for the Erasmus+ Youth in Action programme, which is based in Bonn. He is a co-founder and former managing director of the International Center for Education and Exchange (IBB) in Dortmund, Germany.

✉ wicke@jfemail.de

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Authors:

Manfred von Hebel
Hans-Georg Wicke

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